

Helping athletes to thrive: A conceptual framework for the promotion of mental health, well-being and performance in sport

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Introduction

Sport is an area of life that is strongly driven by the desire to perform which can encourage athletes to neglect their health and well-being. It is therefore not surprising that research on mental health in sport has found prevalence of diagnosable psychiatric disorders ranging from 4% to 68% [Elbe & Nylandsted Jensen, 2016]. Recent data from Switzerland suggest that over 50% of female and over 30% of male elite Swiss athletes exceed the cut-off criteria for the diagnosis of at least one of the following mental disorders [depression, sleep disorder, eating disorder, anxiety disorder; Röthlin et al., 2023].

Thriving describes a combination of high well-being, mental health (i.e., flourishing), and a sustained high level of performance [Brown et al., 2018], and could therefore be an ideal term to promote both in the context of sport.

Aim

The purpose of this poster is to provide a conceptual framework to guide coaches in promoting mental health, well-being and performance (i.e. thriving) in athletes. An additional aim is to embed the framework within an overarching framework model to enable the recommendations to be systematized and extended to other parts of the sport system at a later stage.

Procedure

Literature on the promotion of mental health and well-being in sport setting was (non-systematically) searched and critically reviewed.

Results

Several initiatives have been developed in recent years (e.g. International Olympic Committee, 2023; Durand-Bush & Van Slingerland, 2021; Purcell et

al., 2019) to systematically promote the mental health of athletes. In order to explain and understand the interconnected systems and complex interactions that shape the different dimensions of human development and behavior, several scholars propose an ecological framework that explains the complex multifaceted relationship between athletes, their support system, the socio-cultural aspects of their sport and society at large [Durand-Bush & Van Slingerland, 2021; Purcell et al., 2019; see Figure 1].

In order to explain the coach's field of action and the athlete's direct involvement, this poster focuses on the athlete's opportunities to actively enable thriving (i.e., by actively changing their attitudes, improving their skills and building new knowledge and behavioral repertoires) and the athlete's microsystem (coaches, teammates, parents/family/loved ones, high performance staff). For the non-systematic review, 30 papers were considered.

In this evaluation, two sources were found to be particularly helpful in informing the athlete and microsystem conceptual framework. One source was a scoping review that examined risk and protective factors for mental health in elite athletes [Kuettel & Larsen, 2020]. The second article presented a conceptual model of mental health and performance in North American athletes [Ayala et al., 2022]. The framework (see Figure 2) defines six areas in which coaches have primary responsibility for promoting the thriving of their athletes at the microsystem level (i.e., mental health stigma [e.g. Chow et al., 2021]; mental health literacy [e.g. Liddle et al., 2021]; social support and team relationships [e.g., Nicholls & Jones, 2013]; psychological needs satisfaction [e.g., Lundqvist & Raglin, 2015]; intentional practice with a focus on injury and overtraining prevention [e.g., Miranda-Comas et al., 2022]; and career management [e.g., Küttel & Larsen, 2020]). In three other areas,

coaches and the microsystem play a supporting role by helping to promote factors that have been shown to influence athletes' wellbeing, mental health and performance (i.e., self-awareness [e.g., Ayala et al., 2022]; mindfulness [e.g., Myall et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2021]; setback and stress management including psychological skills training [e.g., Ayala et al., 2022]). The proposed conceptual framework can be used to enable coaches to proactively enhance the flourishing and performance of their athletes.

Conclusion

- An ecological framework is suitable for systematically addressing the individual and environmental factors that need to be considered to promote an athlete's thriving.
- Coaches have a key role to play in promoting an athlete's thriving at the microsystem level and in supporting athletes to facilitate thriving at the individual level.

Future Directions

- The measures presented represent the state of a preliminary analysis. The integration of current research should be refined.
- A subdivision of the measures into promotion of thriving, primary prevention, early detection and intervention, and treatment and rehabilitation should be considered.
- Systematic research on the promotion of thriving in the context of sport should be extended to other stakeholders in the microsystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem.
- To emphasize changes and future trends of the digital age, technical and virtual contexts (e.g., social media) should be considered and integrated [Navarro & Tudge, 2023].

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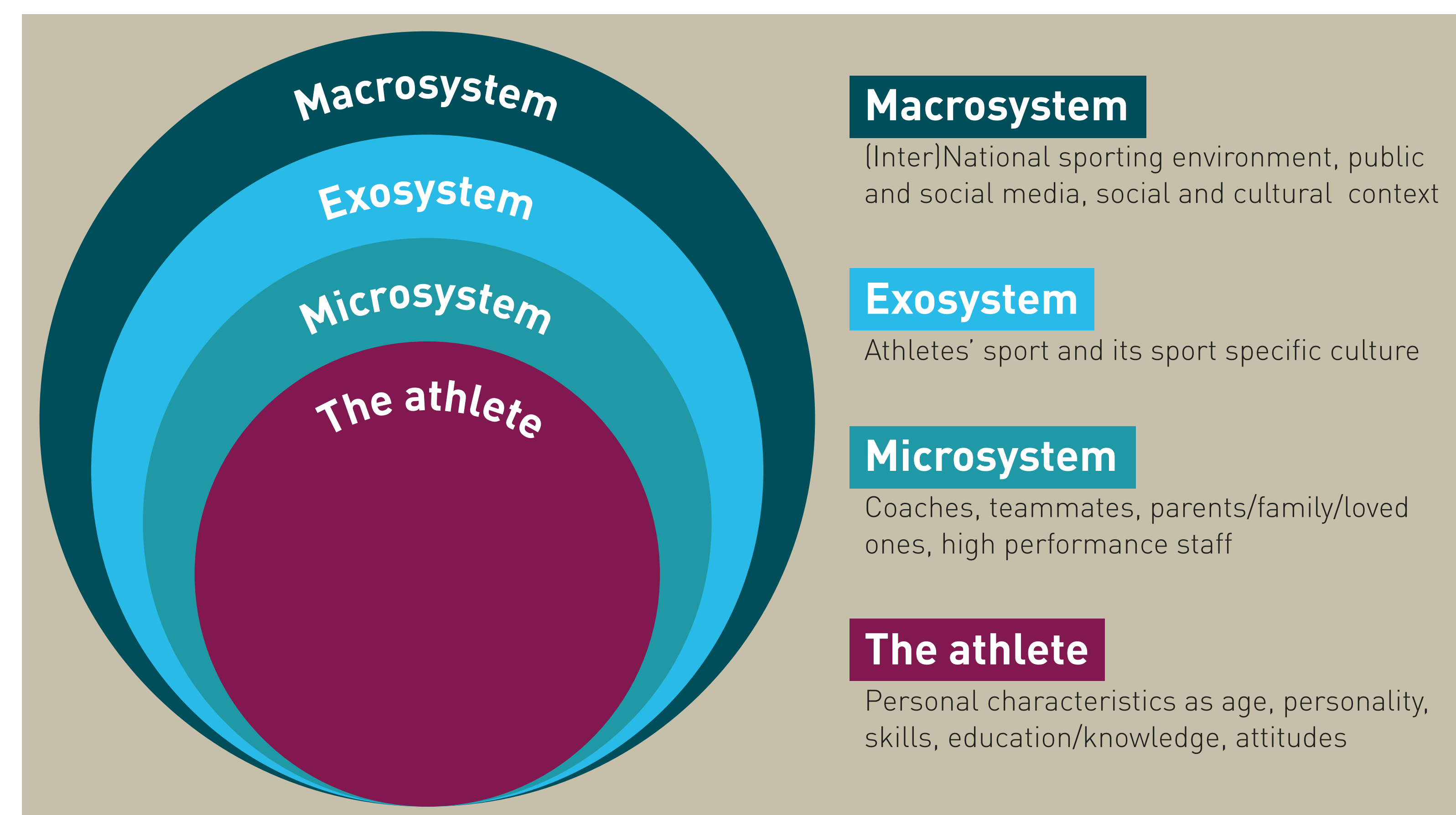


Fig. 1. An ecological systems model to promote thriving after Purcell et al. (2019) based on the Ecology of Human Development originally created by Bronfenbrenner (e.g. Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

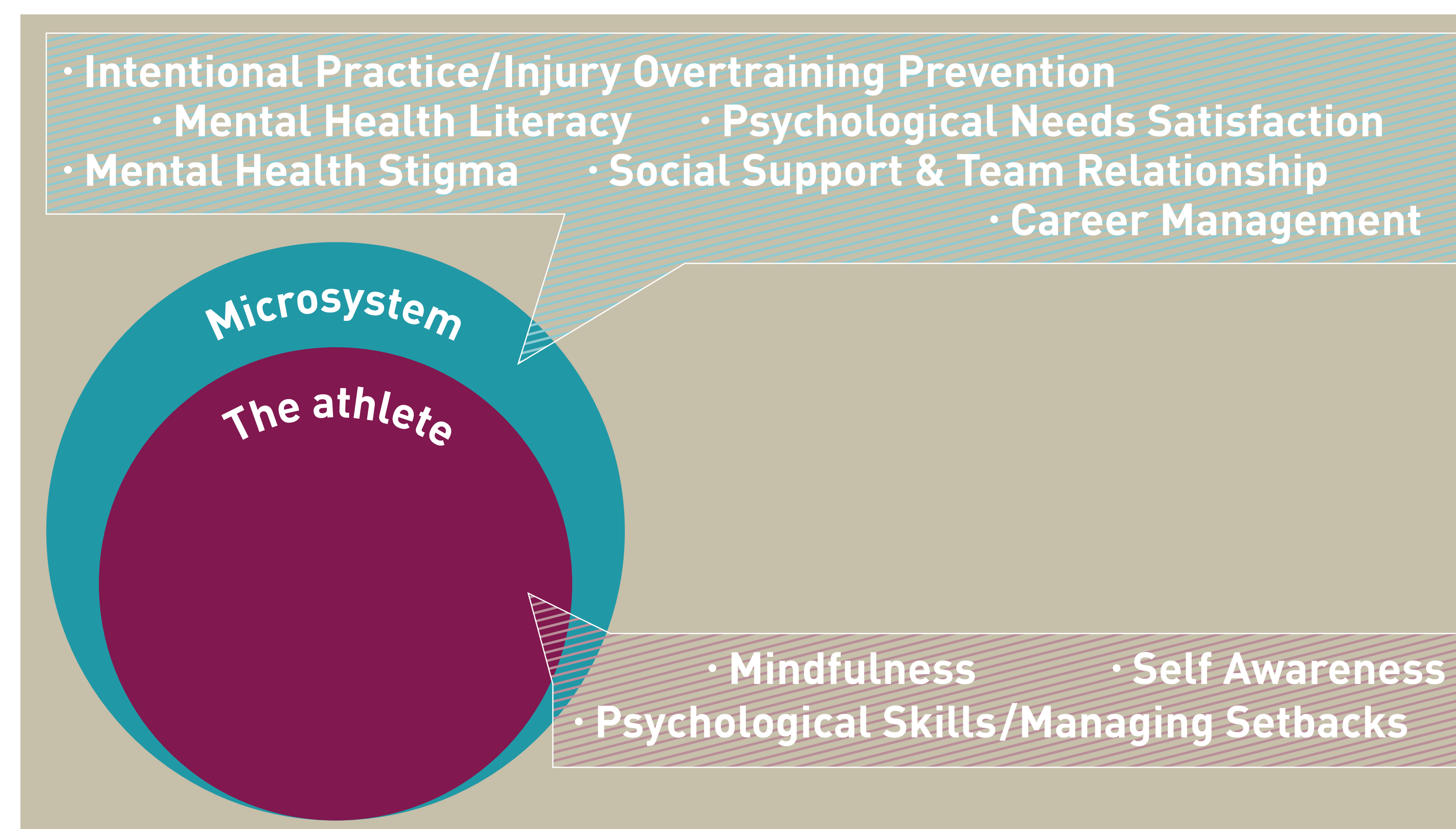


Fig. 2. Fields of action for coaches to promote their athletes' thriving. Areas in the microsystem = coach has the main responsibility. Areas in the athlete system = coach has a supporting role.

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